The quintessential “haunting experience” is entering a haunted house, either literally while legend tripping or figuratively while telling or listening to a ghost story (see chapter 1 for a full discussion of legend tripping). Ghosts and their haunted domains are inseparable in ghost stories because the presence of the ghost is what changes an otherwise mundane place into a portal through which the living encounter the realm of the supernatural. This chapter is not concerned with considering the empirical reality of either ghosts or haunted houses, but rather with trying to describe and understand the metaphysical landscape in which the stories about these supernatural entities are set. Highly stylized haunted houses are especially important in children’s ghost stories. Children explore the limits of reality through imaginative play in various kinds of metahouses—dollhouses, playhouses, tree houses, carnival fun houses, etc.—and haunted houses function much the same way for them.

Houses are the primary domains that ghosts inhabit or “haunt,” although ghosts do lurk in various other sites—castles, forests, caves, and so on. We humans have an incredibly powerful psychological attachment to our houses—our sanctuaries—and the intrusion of a threatening, otherworldly force in that otherwise safe setting is terrifying to consider. As one researcher pointed out, “As long as houses remain a central symbol in American culture, our writers are likely to inhabit them with the anxieties
that haunt our day-to-day lives” (Bailey 1999, 109). In oral tradition and popular fiction, humans either unwittingly stumble into haunted houses or, paradoxically, seek out the haunted house and confront it as a way of testing their courage. The result is nearly always the same: the person entering the haunted house comes away profoundly changed by the experience.

In many ghost stories, the haunted house functions as both setting and character, with the sentient and self-aware house taking precedence over the beings that haunt it. Haunted houses are active participants in the development of the narrative plot, especially in popular fiction, and exhibit malevolent intentions toward the humans who dare to enter them. Staircases twist and turn and trip human visitors, doors mysteriously appear and disappear or lock and unlock. The house and the ghosts that haunt it are partners in the supernatural assault upon humans who invade their domain. This chapter will examine how the shared image of the iconic haunted house and its narrative function have developed over time and now are remarkably consistent throughout all the genres and media in which it is represented, ranging from literature to oral tradition.

Looking Backward: Literary Gothic Predecessors

The haunted house stories that are so popular today, primarily in the English-speaking world, have a distinguished literary lineage. At first, the haunted house was a rather passive setting for ghostly activity. For example, among the earliest written ghost stories set in haunted houses are those of the Romans, specifically Plautus, Pliny the Younger, and Lucian. These ancient literary ghost stories deal with the familiar formula of restless ghosts who haunt the houses where they lived until their deaths are discovered and avenged (Felton 1999). The houses themselves are of little importance beyond providing a setting for the interactions between the ghosts and humans. Haunted houses were not a significant literary setting again until the Romantic period.
The concept of the haunted house as the focus of a distinctive type of Romantic literature originated in the gothic novels of eighteenth and early nineteenth-century England, and was influenced somewhat by French and other continental literature of the period. The first true English-language gothic was *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole, published in 1764 and—like Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein, or, the Modern Prometheus* ([1818] 1983)—it was allegedly inspired by the author’s dream. Over time, according to one literary critic, “gothic novelists employed their gloomy settings as a shorthand for the hierarchies of aristocracy and theocracy which they detested and which their revolutionary age fatally undermined” (Bailey 1999, 5).

The decrepit, gloomy castles and mansions that became the stock settings of these early English novels were based on the real landscape of England and other parts of Europe that were filled with crumbling castles and other ancient ruins and

![Figure 1: A deserted house with the reputation of being haunted. Shortly after this photograph was taken, the house mysteriously burned. St. John’s, Newfoundland. (Photo by Diane Goldstein)](image-url)
monuments. Lacking ruined castles on the landscape, the American literary imagination instead focused on the dowager Victorian and Second Empire mansions that were popular with wealthy aristocrats throughout the country during the Gilded Age of the nineteenth century. With their distinctive mansard roofs, towers and turrets, multiple stories, and ornate architectural embellishments, these buildings became symbols of opulence and decadence (figure 1). What went on inside these mansions was the subject of much speculation by the general public. Since these were the dwellings of the super-rich, most Americans never set foot inside these mansions, which gave the buildings a sort of other-worldliness, anonymity, and mystery analogous to that of ruined European castles. After the financial busts following the turn of the century, many of these American buildings were abandoned and began to fall into disrepair. Darkened and boarded up, they attracted the attention and imagination of passersby in a way that they never had when they were glittering and new. Local legends of hauntings and other strange goings-on began to accrue to these decrepit, abandoned buildings. Over time, these local legends generalized into what we today call ghost stories.

Literary critic and author Dale Bailey, in *American Nightmares: The Haunted House Formula in American Popular Fiction* (1999), focuses specifically on literary haunted houses rather than those in which the ghost stories of oral tradition are set. He agrees that the haunted houses of contemporary popular fiction are indebted to the gothic tradition, but he goes on to conclude that the houses of popular fiction are a metaphor for the despairs and fault lines of contemporary society—moral, psychological, and economic. According to Bailey, the haunted house formula is “a profoundly versatile tool for examining the anxieties and tensions inherent in our national experiment, the haunted house finally seems like nothing less than a symbol of America and the American mind, of all the ghosts that haunt us, from the dark legacy of slavery to the failed war in Vietnam” (114).

The haunted houses in which ghost stories from oral tradition are set have a slightly different function, especially in the
formulaic stories children tell. These spooky and stylized settings allow children to examine the limits of reality during storytelling sessions, and then return to the safety and security of the schoolroom, party, or bedroom. The haunted house settings of most adult traditional oral ghost stories, on the other hand, are rather benign. In fact, the traditional ghost story overall is not nearly as dramatic as the tales presented in contemporary popular fiction.

**What Does a Haunted House Look Like?**

Ask any group of children, or even adults, to draw a picture of a haunted house and they will all draw essentially the same picture of the outside facade of the house. Depictions of an archetypal haunted house contain some combination of the following distinctive motifs: multistoried, mansard or gambrel roof, turrets or towers, and broken or boarded-up windows with “spooky” inhabitants peeking out (figure 2). Furthermore, the darkened house is generally on an isolated hilltop, surrounded by a high broken fence, with leafless dead trees and/or a witch on a broomstick silhouetted against a full moon. Black cats and bats lurk in the background of typical drawings and occasionally a ghost peeks out of an upstairs window, saying “Boo!”

As pointed out in the examples in chapter 3, oral tradition (especially stories told by adults) encompasses many other types of haunted houses—ranging from suburban, split-level ranch houses to fraternity houses to businesses and so on. This variety of setting is appropriate because oral tradition holds that any structure in which a ghost appears is thereby haunted. Nevertheless, the most common depiction of the haunted house, especially in children’s narratives and popular culture, is the stereotypical multistoried mansion discussed above.

One way to conceptualize the exterior of the traditional haunted house is to compare it to the enchanted castle, a common folktale setting. The traditional folktale or magic tale is an ancient and elegant narrative genre best known to contemporary audiences through the printed redactions of the Grimm Brothers,
Figure 2: A typical Halloween party decoration depicting a haunted house, complete with full moon, bats in the belfry, lurking ghosts and skeletons, and broken windows. (Image courtesy of The Beistle Company, Shippensburg, Pennsylvania, Design 01370.)
Jakob and Wilhelm, in the early nineteenth century (Grimm [1812–14] 1944). The genre is characterized by one-dimensional characters, especially princes and princesses, who live in or yearn for enchanted castles and who must overcome seemingly insurmountable odds through the assistance of benign supernatural helpers. The luminous and enchanted castle, especially its exterior facade, is so deeply embedded within the narrative structure of the folktale that the ancient, oral genre cannot exist without it. Both the enchanted castle and the haunted house of literature and oral tradition are generally set apart from mundane, quotidian reality by being isolated high up on a hill, but there the similarity ends. The enchanted castle is bright and shining; the haunted house is dark and brooding. The enchanted castle is filled with music and laughter; the haunted house contains evil and frightening, mysterious noises. The lines of the enchanted castle are geometrically precise and the perspective is reliable; the haunted house is skewed and out of focus. The inhabitants of the enchanted castle are radiant, shining, and joyful. Dark, vague, ephemeral creatures and apparitions drift through haunted houses. The two settings are diametric opposites or, to use folktale imagery, the haunted house is the evil mirror image of the enchanted castle.

Interestingly, even with the overall agreement regarding what the exterior of a haunted house looks like, little of the action of a good ghost story takes place outside of a haunted house. Characters may be terrified as they approach the house, but nothing happens to them until they enter it, passing from the reality of the outside world to the supernatural domain inside the house. Thus in ghost stories the distinctive exterior is subordinated to the dramatic action which takes place inside the haunted house—usually in the upper stories, the basement, or on the staircase.

Actual houses on the American landscape—both lived in and vacant—gain the reputation for being haunted simply on the basis of how closely they resemble the iconic haunted house of oral tradition and literature (figure 3). People take one look at these houses, especially if they are a bit run-down or surrounded
by dense foliage and a broken fence, and decide immediately that they are haunted. The negative reputation of these buildings is enhanced if the inhabitants are elderly or reclusive. Owners of these houses report frequent vandalism and harassment, especially around Halloween.

One house which has become a lucrative tourist attraction because it looks like a haunted house is the famous Winchester Mystery House, discussed at some length in chapter 3. Although there is no resident ghost or other reason to designate this eccentric, never-finished mansion as haunted, when tourists go inside of the Winchester Mystery House it speaks to them through disembodied voices emanating from interpretive loudspeakers hidden in its walls and grounds. There’s just enough that’s oddly creepy about the Winchester Mystery House that one can see why

Figure 3: A house in Las Vegas, New Mexico, with the reputation of being haunted. (Photo by Joan Alessi)
Stephen King took the idea to Hollywood horror heights in his TV miniseries *Rose Red* (2002). According to one Web site, “The house itself actually becomes a character in the film, taking on a monstrous life of its own. And like Sarah Winchester’s mansion, it is never quite finished and at one point, the characters hear the sounds of otherworldly hammering and sawing” (Taylor 2002). In the movie, Rose Red is in Seattle, but despite the change of address and heightened drama, the parallels between Rose Red and the Winchester mansion are clear, as the movie’s official Web site indicates: “[Rose Red] was built in 1907 by Seattle oil magnate John P. Rimbauer. His wife, Ellen, had spent her life adding on to the house—bizarre rooms like a mirror-floored library and stairs leading nowhere—until she mysteriously disappeared into it. Yet in the decades since Mrs. Rimbauer vanished and the construction stopped, the house has gotten even bigger, seemingly all by itself” (The Tale 2002). An even more creative twist on the theme of a self-creating house is an innovative novel by Anne Rivers Siddons, *The House Next Door* (1979). In this “utterly familiar and strikingly innovative” novel, the house destroys every family that inhabits it because the house literally personifies the evil that underlies the unfortunate life history of the architect (Bailey 1999, 79). Popular culture haunted houses that have a life of their own and draw energy from their human inhabitants or intruders are rarely found in oral tradition.

**Interior of a Haunted House**

To better understand how the haunted house functions as the setting for ghost stories, conceptually one must cross the threshold and be enveloped by the supernatural domain within. Oral tradition and its ability to tap into our psychological collective unconscious presents the interior of the iconic haunted house as a setting in which to verbalize our deepest fear and loathing. For example, with the lyrical imagery of innocence, a child reacting to the sight of the bombed-out shell of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City remarked, “It looked like a haunted house without walls.” Familiarity with
the iconic architecture of the haunted house provided a way for this child to conceptualize an otherwise inconceivable sight (Ross and Myers 1996, 13).

Although the exterior of the iconic haunted house is ideal for visual representation in popular culture to set a receptive and creepy, chill-bumpy mood, the interior of the house takes on special significance in the narrative development of ghost stories. Contemporary ghost stories about haunted houses told by American children generally dismiss the exterior of the house with a simple reference such as “and there was this big old haunted house.” No description is necessary because the image is so well fixed through literature and popular culture. A mere reference is sufficient to evoke the image in the minds of the listeners. Likewise, in oral tales the interior of the house is not described in any detail. There is no need to specify the type or arrangement of furniture or the color of the wall hangings or drapes. When listening to or telling a ghost story, the internal imagination of the listener or teller furnishes the interior of the house. The only necessary cue is the realization that once the door slams shut after the protagonist has crossed the threshold, whatever takes place inside the house will be other-worldly and surreal, and the laws of logic and physics no longer apply.

Once inside the haunted house, the action of the ghost story usually takes place in the attic or the basement or on the connecting staircase, locations rich with psychological symbolism of isolation and evil (Grider 1976; Tucker 1980; Felton 1999). According to folklorist Gillian Bennett, “Haunted places are thus seen to be no-go areas such as cellars and attics, or betwixt-and-between places such as stairs and doorways. . . . All these expressions and assumptions may be found time and again in accounts of hauntings from medieval sermon stories to popular ghost gazetteers” (1999, 44). By crossing the threshold from the safe natural world outside into the interior of the haunted house, the human characters have moved horizontally from one reality into another. The liminal staircase, which is neither up nor down, enables the human characters to move vertically between
the levels of horror within the haunted house. The attic and the basement are the extreme or most remote locations within the house and, therefore, the farthest away from reality. The attic or garret is at the top of the house, closest to the roof and the safety of the reality outside. But that roof or vaulted ceiling is still an impenetrable barrier that traps the human in the supernatural realm. The basement is organically at the bottom of the house; it is below the ground, in contact with the forces of the underworld. Whereas the roof or windows of the attic provide tantalizing hopes for escape and reunion with the outside world and reality, escape from an earth-dug cellar is hopeless and impossible, psychologically analogous to being buried alive.

These locations within the haunted house are spatially unambiguous and favor tight, well-defined, enclosed spaces. To a viewer outside of a house, the general floor plan of the building may be ambiguous, but the top/attic and bottom/basement are unmistakable. The relative position of horizontal bedrooms, sitting rooms, parlors, and so forth follows no logical pattern and cannot be discerned from observing the outside facade of the house. Neither do these rooms figure in most narrative ghost stories, unless there is a secret staircase or passageway connected to one of these rooms. But it is obvious to one viewing the outside of a multistoried house that it must have an attic and a basement connected by a staircase and that those areas delineate the top and bottom of the house. This dynamic focus of activity on the staircase and its upper and lower termini explains why the haunted house of tradition and popular culture is nearly always multistoried. The interior action of a ghost story dictates the exterior configuration of the limits of a haunted house.

The liminal staircase, of course, joins the two terminal loci of the attic and the basement; being on the staircase means that one is neither up nor down. In oral ghost stories, the general pattern is for the helpless human victim to hide or take refuge in an upstairs bedroom or the attic when the ghost is first heard or appears on the stairs. The ghost and not the human controls the action on the staircase (figure 4).
The most dramatic example of a ghost story that fits this pattern is the common children’s adaptation of Mark Twain’s “The Golden Arm” discussed in chapter 4 in which the ghost methodically ascends the staircase, announcing his progress step-by-step by intoning, “I want my golden arm.” The story concludes with a dramatic scream from the narrator, who grabs a listener and shouts, “Now I’ve got it!” In this popular story, the ghost rises from the grave to reclaim whatever the human protagonist has stolen from it. As the story unfolds, it becomes a drama that breaches the “fourth wall” and makes both storyteller and audience active.

Figure 4: A contemporary child’s drawing of a haunted house depicting a ghost moving up the stairs from the basement to the top story bedroom. The ghost on the staircase may depict the antagonist of the popular children’s ghost story, “The Ghost of One Black Eye.” (Drawing courtesy of Jeannie Banks Thomas)
members of the cast. The house to which the protagonist retreats after robbing the corpse is not haunted until the vengeful ghost enters and stalks the guilty human. As told by children, part of what makes this story so popular is the terrifying concept of the invasion of a safe haven by an evil, supernatural force intent on justified revenge. The story becomes a cautionary tale that implies that no place is really safe for one who breaks society’s rules, in this case by stealing from a corpse.

The subliminal association of house basements with castle dungeons and torture chambers makes the basement infinitely more threatening than the attic, which frequently serves as a last refuge. Humans generally hide in attics to escape ghosts, but they still do not escape unscathed. A common ghost story motif is the human protagonist who survives the encounter with a ghost in a haunted house, but is later found catatonic—with their hair turned white—in an attic or closet (motif F1041.7). The popular culture stereotype features ghostly sounds coming from the attic, and the most common sound is rattling chains. Ghosts frequently pursue their human prey to the absolute upper limits of the house—namely, the attic. But ghosts and monsters do hide in basements and cellars, where they lure unsuspecting humans to suffer unspeakable terrors. In reality, murder victims are sometimes buried in cellars or basements, thus adding to the general perception that these lower reaches of domesticity are dangerous and frightening. Perhaps one reason the murder of child beauty queen JonBenet Ramsey in the basement of the elegant family home in Boulder, Colorado, during the Christmas holidays in 1996 created such intense popular interest is the juxtaposition of potent but conflicting cultural symbols: basement, murder, beautiful child, Christmas (e.g., Douglas and Olshaker 2000; Schiller 1999; Wecht 1998).

As folklorist William Nicholaisen points out, the juxtaposition of upper and lower is a dominant feature of folktale settings and the lower realms are always associated with evil and other-worldliness: “the vertical descent always remains just that—a going down through a hole, a crack, a passage into a dark and unfamiliar and therefore exotically threatening world below” (1990, 17). Perhaps
as a way of defusing some of the intrinsic terror of going into a real basement in a real house, many children’s ghost stories have a jokelike structure that ends with a punch line rather than the murder or torture of the child protagonist. One cycle of these ghost stories parodies childish fears of basements by having the child protagonist beat up or otherwise subdue the invisible entity in the dark basement. In these stories, the unseen ghostly voice keeps chanting, “One black eye, one black eye.” The ingenuous or otherwise innocent child protagonist turns the world of the ghost story upside down by finally replying, “Shut up or you’ll be the Ghost of Two Black Eyes.” Children readily understand the not-so-subtle pun on who’s going to get black eyes in a fight between the ghost and the protagonist (Vlach 1971; Grider 1976, 1980a, 1980b; Tucker 1980). This story is discussed in more detail in chapter 4.

In this jocular tale, the young hero demonstrates that the enclosed spaces of the basement in children’s ghost stories are, according to Nicholaisen, “worlds of magic and otherness, of evil intentions and deserving rewards for kindness shown, which the adventurous, the bold, the fortunate, and the sweet-tempered can reach without damage—though not without risk—and from which one can return better, richer, and more favored than ever” (17). As chapter 4 explains, children’s ghost stories enable children to explore the world of the supernatural and at the same time maintain emotional distance from the truly frightening concepts.

**Popular Literature**

Consistent with the ghost stories of oral tradition, the aesthetic of contemporary literary supernatural terror is introspective. Within the walls of the haunted house of popular fiction lurk all manner of supernatural and sadistic terrors, expected and unexpected. Readers know that any human foolish enough to enter one of these haunted houses will be the victim of supernatural or demented, evil-possessed villains.

Popular literature ghost stories and haunted houses do, however, differ from oral tradition in one main aspect. For one thing,
the literary haunted house puts the entire nuclear family at risk. In children’s ghost stories, on the other hand, only the young protagonist actually enters the haunted house; no adults are around to provide assistance or rescue. Popular literature also exploits the haunted house formula in order to achieve unusual or dramatic variations on the theme of supernatural encounters. This formula is clearly outlined in Dale Bailey’s *American Nightmares: The Haunted House Formula in American Popular Fiction*. According to this formula, the plot employs a sequential structure in which “an escalating series of supernatural events…isolates the family physically and psychologically” followed by “the discovery of provenance of those events.” The climax of this discovery is either “the escape of the family and the destruction of the house” or “the escape of the family and the continued existence of the house” and “a twist ending which establishes the recurring nature of evil” (1999, 56).

Oral tradition, as is appropriate to tradition’s innate conservatism, adheres rather consistently to a few basic themes which differ significantly from those of popular fiction; for example, ghosts go away when they are avenged, humans who encounter ghosts frequently come off badly or at least are changed by the encounter, and traditional ghost narratives are generally low-key and nondramatic.

Following a trend utilized earlier by Edgar Allen Poe in *Fall of the House of Usher* ([1839] 1979) and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The House of the Seven Gables* ([1851] 1933), popular literature has brought the literary innovation of the haunted house as character to unexpected heights of psychological terror. The unseen supernatural inhabitants of these haunted houses assume the role of supporting characters who are seemingly controlled by the house itself. Instead of functioning as a deus ex machina, the haunted house *is* the machina, completely outside of human control. As pointed out by E. J. Clery in *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction, 1762–1800* (1995), this particular role of the haunted house is at least as old as the gothic novel itself. According to Clery,
Montague Summers was one of the first, though not the last, to remark that it is the haunted castle, rather than any of the assorted heroes or villains, that takes the role of protagonist in the majority of Gothic fictions, embodying the influence of the past over the present, the dead over the living. From *The Castle of Otranto* onwards this priority is reflected in their titles. . . . Formally speaking, inanimate property takes on independent life; the existence of its inhabitants is subordinate to the unfolding of its fate. (1995,73)

Almost two hundred years after Walpole wrote *The Castle of Otranto*, Shirley Jackson, an undisputed master of the genre, created one of the most chilling descriptions in all of literature of a haunted house:

No human eye can isolate the unhappy coincidence of line and place which suggests evil in the face of a house, and yet somehow a maniac juxtaposition, a badly turned angle, some chance meeting of roof and sky, turned Hill House into a place of despair, more frightening because the face of Hill House seemed awake, with a watchfulness from the blank windows and a touch of glee in the eyebrow of a cornice. Almost any house, caught unexpectedly or at an odd angle, can turn a deeply humorous look on a watching person; even a mischievous little chimney, or a dormer like a dimple, can catch up a beholder with a sense of fellowship; but a house arrogant and hating, never off guard, can only be evil. This house, which seemed somehow to have formed itself, flying together into its own powerful pattern under the hands of its builders, fitting itself into its own construction of lines and angles, reared its great head back against the sky without concession to humanity. It was a house without kindness, never meant to be lived in, not a fit place for people or for love or for hope. Exorcism cannot alter the countenance of a house; Hill House would stay as it was until it was destroyed. (1959, 34–35)
In contrast to the female Monster House discussed later in this chapter, Hill House, “with its tower erect against the sky is ‘unmistakably male’ . . . and it doesn’t treat its women kindly” (Bailey 1999, 14). Shirley Jackson’s description of Hill House echoes Poe’s introduction to *Fall of the House of Usher*:

During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country; and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher. I know not how it was—but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. . . . I looked upon the scene before me—upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain—upon the bleak walls—upon the vacant eye-like windows—upon a few rank sedges—and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees—with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon opium—the bitter lapse into common life—the hideous dropping off of the veil. . . . (Poe [1839] 1979, 1237–38)

Recognition of these famous literary haunted houses is so widespread in American culture that these images synergistically reinforce the haunted houses of tradition, which are minimally, even elliptically, described in ghost stories. No external description of them is necessary for a reader or listener to know exactly in what setting the action of a good ghost story unfolds.

**Popular Culture Spin-Offs That Reinforce Tradition**

Haunted houses are a staple of popular fiction, and images of haunted houses in a wide range of other contexts have become a staple of American popular culture in general. The famous New Yorker cartoonist Charles Addams (1912–88) probably has
done more than any other individual to standardize the stereotypical image of the haunted house in America discussed earlier in this chapter. Hired in the 1940s as a full time cartoonist for the *New Yorker*, he drew over 1,300 cartoons before his death in 1988. He also published numerous anthologies and collections of his cartoons (e.g., Addams 1991). Through the years he created, expanded, and refined his famous “Addams Family” who lived in what has become the quintessential haunted house image of popular culture. Addams drew his haunted house with the familiar motifs: dilapidated, multistoried, broken windows, mansard roof, turrets, and leafless trees surrounded by a broken fence, and with a dark and stormy background. He drew scores of similar images during his career, culminating with the so-called Addams House in which his menagerie of creepy ghouls and monsters live. According to Ron MacCloskey, founder of the Charles Addams Art Scholarship Fund, Addams’s famous cartoon haunted house is modeled on a Second Empire house in Westfield, New Jersey, his hometown (Charles Addams n.d.).

The appeal of Addams’s haunted creation was spread even wider when *The Addams Family* became a popular TV sitcom which ran from 1964 to 1966 and still appears in reruns. In 1977 a made-for-TV movie, *Halloween with the New Addams Family*, was telecast. In 1991 *The Addams Family* was released in theaters as a movie, followed in 1993 by *Addams Family Values*. Although these movies and television episodes featured live actors, an animated version based on the Addams characters ran on TV from 1973–75. The animated characters also made a guest appearance on *Scooby Doo*, resulting in the “haunted” castle or mansion set that is now a standard feature of this animated children’s comedy about a talking dog and his mystery-solving human companions (1969–72). The perennially popular characters moved from cartoons to live action movies in *Scooby Doo* (2002) and *Scooby Doo 2: Monsters Unleashed* (2004). Although considerably less popular than *The Addams Family*, *The Munsters*, another live-character TV sitcom, which ran from 1964 to 1966, also featured a family of eccentrics and supernaturals living in a haunted mansion. These characters all live on and on in TV reruns, introducing successive
generations of American children to the primary motifs of the quirky popular culture haunted house and its many supernatural and sometimes zany denizens. In the past forty years or so, other movies have featured or parodied a haunted house remarkably similar to Charles Addams’s creepy mansion, including *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), *Psycho* (1960), and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), all of which have developed devoted cult followings that keep them in circulation decade after decade.

There have been innumerable movies featuring haunted houses in the thirty or so years since the Addams Family TV sitcom and movies. The most recent of these is the animated, PG-rated *Monster House*, released in the summer of 2006. This eponymous house is perhaps the best example of a haunted house that exhibits virtually every literary conceit and traditional motif associated with the theme. Similar to *Rose Red* and *The House Next Door*, this house is alive because it has absorbed the spirit of its angry and eccentric builder. A much-maligned fat lady in a circus, this woman hates children because they were her primary tormenters in the circus. She died during the construction of her dream house when she was chasing a gang of hooligans away from the site. She slipped and fell, with the cement mixer, into the unfinished basement and her corpse was entombed there in the concrete. This episode resonates with folklorists as a variation on the well-known ballad “The Walled-Up Wife,” with its echoes of foundation sacrifice (Dundes 1996). Her bereft husband finished the house, which erupts in fury years later when some neighborhood children go inside and are trapped in the basement and then escape.

In an action-filled, suspenseful sequence several minutes long Monster House tears itself from its foundation and chases the terrified children into a construction site. In the process, the house totally deconstructs and is finally dynamited out of existence by one of the children. And of course this walking haunted house is reminiscent of the hut on dancing chicken legs of the Russian fairy tale witch, Baba Yaga. The self-deconstruction of Monster House also resembles the more lyrical and surrealistic mechanical castle in *Howl’s Moving Castle* (2004), a classic animated film by
the Japanese master of the medium, Hayao Miyazaki. The force that drives Howl’s castle is not human hatred but rather a benign fire spirit who is the custodian of the hero’s heart or life force. All of these various media creations combined—from magazine cartoons to TV sitcoms to animated movies to online video games—have helped etch the multistoried, turreted mansion into American popular culture as the prototypical haunted house.

**The Material Culture of Popular Culture Haunted Houses**

Haunted houses have become a kind of metaphysical category of material culture through their representation in a variety of popular culture media. Stylized images of haunted houses are especially prevalent at Halloween, when graphics of haunted houses are featured on greeting cards, book covers, and other seasonal decorations (Belk 1994). Miniature haunted houses, complete with lights and spooky sound effects, are popular decorations during the Halloween season. Advertising for everything from candy to new cars exploits the pop culture repertoire of Halloween in every context imaginable, and haunted houses are part of nearly every advertisement. Knowledge of this shared cultural archetype is thus taught to each new generation and renewed annually by Halloween marketing (figure 5).

Halloween marketing has made Halloween the second most lucrative holiday for merchants, closely following Christmas for consumer expenditures (Belk 1994). Although early in the twentieth century Halloween was largely a vernacular holiday celebrated by children wearing homemade costumes, today the holiday is big business targeting adults perhaps even more than children. Children’s Halloween activities in many communities have been relegated to carefully regulated costume parades in shopping malls and local neighborhoods before dark, after which parents take the children to local hospitals to have their candy treats X-rayed for “razor blades in apples,” an apparent popular response to the murder in 1974 of a child in Texas with trick-or-treat candy (Ellis 1994). Although the Texas
murderer, the child’s father, used packaged Pixi Stix candy laced with cyanide to kill his child, the popular imagination has seized instead on the more threatening and hyperbolic image of razor blades and straight pins allegedly being inserted into the treats by unknown persons (Best and Horiuchi 1985; Grider 1984).

But what of haunted houses at Halloween? As mentioned above, images of fanciful, stereotypical haunted houses are used in all sorts of Halloween advertising, especially to advertise “spooktacular” sales at local department stores and such. Party favors and decorations also feature haunted houses in various combinations with other Halloween motifs, including ghosts, witches, black cats, and bats. Special topical, mass-market picture books are published annually around Halloween, many of which portray visits to cartoonish haunted houses (e.g., Bunting 1994). Halloween greeting cards are perhaps the most common medium in which haunted houses are depicted. Surrounded
by this avalanche of holiday-themed popular culture, the connection between haunted houses and Halloween is annually and emphatically reinforced.

As a result of this flood of marketing, the haunted house of current popular culture has lost most of the ominous and numinous quality associated with the literary haunted house and has become instead a benign, stereotyped cartoon or other medium of entertainment. Nevertheless, the constant reinforcement by popular culture of the image of the stereotypical haunted house keeps the darker concept in the forefront of public awareness. Advertisements and other popular culture venues never have to explain what a haunted house is to viewers. Consumers recognize a haunted house when they see one!

The popular appeal of haunted house images extends far beyond Halloween. One of the most popular attractions at Disneyland Anaheim is the venerable Haunted Mansion in New Orleans Square, which opened in 1965 (Grim Ghosts 2004). This elaborate and stereotypical haunted house contains practically every conceit associated with the genre, from both literature and popular culture, including a vast cast of animatronic ghosts as well as architectural features inside and out designed to both fascinate and shock visitors (Baham 2002). The designers of the attraction readily admit their debt to popular literature, including Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), during the planning of the Haunted Mansion attraction.

Disneyland’s Pirates of the Caribbean ride opened in 1967, and in many ways is an extension of the Haunted Mansion attraction. The ghostly pirates and their ghost ship, the *Black Pearl*, were the inspiration for the 2003 movie blockbuster *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* and its sequel *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest* (2006). The final movie in the trilogy, *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World’s End*, was released in the spring of 2007. Disneyland’s animatronic ghosts were the apparent inspiration for Johnny Depp’s Academy Award–nominated portrayal of pirate Jack Sparrow, which further reinforces the close bond between the Disneyland ride and the movie. In movies such as these, the folk and literary traditions merge into a larger
cultural phenomenon of popular culture imitating or quoting other popular culture.

Toy haunted houses and model kits have been marketed since at least the 1960s, when the famed Aurora Plastics Company manufactured a detailed Addams Family Haunted House model kit. Another toy haunted house is the Whipstaff Manor Playset, a marketing tie-in with the haunted house in the movie *Casper* (1995), marketed by Trendmasters, Inc. The most recent example of toy haunted houses is the Goosebumps Terror Tower Playset, marketed by MicroVerse by Kenner, which contains “spring action executions, trap doors, dungeons, and revolving fireplace.” Such mass-marketing directed toward children has transformed not only haunted houses but also Dracula, Frankenstein, werewolves, witches, and ghosts into children’s cartoons and playthings. The enormously successful Goosebumps children’s books owe a tremendous debt to this general acceptance of the supernatural by American children, especially their fondness for haunted houses.

**Commercial and Contrived Haunted Houses at Halloween**

By the 1950s, dramatic mock-ups of various haunted house tableaux became popular throughout the country as fund-raising and entertainment venues during the Halloween season. Typically, a respected service organization will transform a local vacant building into a mock interactive haunted house by creating various rooms, each of which is a scary tableau depicting familiar scenes and characters from the world of the supernatural as well as the crazed and demented, including insane butchers and mad scientists. The exterior of the venue is of little consequence; all that matters is the action that takes place inside. Designated members of the organization dress up as various characters who either act out frightening mini-dramas of torture and ghostly encounters or escort paying customers through the maze (Magliocco 1985). The earlier mock haunted houses were more “kid friendly” than the houses today
with their elaborate gory tableaux. For example, in the earlier venues of thirty or forty years ago customers were blindfolded and led through a series of tactile experiences such as plunging their hands into bowls of peeled grapes that they were told were eyeballs, bowls of cooked spaghetti that they were told were brains, and so forth.

The mock haunted house phenomenon at Halloween accentuates the connection between ghost stories and haunted houses. Mimicking the plots of ghost stories, visitors physically enter the staged scenes and are forced to interact in carefully contrived interior tableaux which are designed to shock and frighten visitors, especially when a costumed member of the cast unexpectedly jumps out at the visitors or grabs them. The “ghost tour” phenomenon discussed in chapter 6 utilizes many of these same techniques, especially having costumed characters scream and lunge at customers during especially dark and scary parts of the tour. The popularity of Halloween haunted house concessions is their focus on action in the interior of the venue, instead of allowing customers to merely view the fixed and static exteriors that the greeting cards, party decorations, figurines, and storybook illustrations portray. Literally and psychologically, these commercial haunted houses are intimate and introspective. The whole point of these productions is to lure customers inside.

These haunted house venues have become so profitable that various “how-to” books are on the market explaining business strategies to enhance profits, in addition to detailed instructions on setting up various scary tableaux (Chavez 1997; Morris and Phillips 1985). The general public, however, resists total year-round commercialization of these local events, preferring instead to keep them as annual Halloween fund-raisers for community charities. In many communities in which trick-or-treating has been banned or is closely restricted and monitored, visits to these haunted house fund-raisers have replaced trick-or-treating.
“Hell Houses”

Since the advent in the 1970s of the ultraconservative political movement commonly known as the “Christian Right,” a new and different type of Halloween haunted house venue is becoming increasingly popular in some parts of the United States. Called “hell houses,” these disturbing productions eschew the conventional supernatural in favor of hyper-realistic depictions of drunken car wrecks, abortions, bad drug trips, gay marriages, and so forth, all of which are intended to create terror and revulsion among audiences. These hell houses conclude with a scene portraying Jesus in heaven and thus, according to one Web site, “proselytize the unsaved public” and also “promote certain conservative Christian beliefs” (Religious Tolerance 2004). After the concluding heavenly tableau, many hell houses then direct visitors to a consultation room where they can pray, fill out visitation forms, or meet with counselors. The goal of hell houses, of course, is to gain converts. These controversial venues have received widespread coverage by both the national and international media, and in 2001 a documentary video was released about the Hell House at Trinity Church of Cedar Hill, Texas (Hell House n.d.; Joseph-Witham 2004).

Hell houses represent the most extreme appropriation and manipulation of the haunted house formula in order to further a religio-political agenda. Nevertheless, these hell houses also can be classified as contemporary variants on the older, more traditional haunted house fund-raising venues. The traditional Halloween haunted houses focus on depictions of the bizarre and the supernatural, but with no agenda other than raising money for charity and entertaining visitors with a good but temporary scare. Special effects at these more conventional venues are usually fairly limited in order to avoid negative publicity that would keep away paying patrons—especially children, the primary audience. The hell houses, on the other hand, definitely do have an outspoken agenda of “in-your-face, high-flyin’, death-defyin’, Satan-be-cryin’, keep-ya-from-fryin’, theater with no holds barred, cuttin-edge evangelism” (God Destiny 2006).
In recent years, as hell houses have become more and more extreme, some of them have allegedly bordered on the illegal and pornographic. There have been unconfirmed reports of the use of real human corpses in at least one hell house in 1999 and also reports of reluctant converts being beaten until they repent while church members watch. In order to maintain the intense and focused presentation style and subject matter, the fundamentalist Destiny Church of the Assemblies of God of Broomfield, Colorado, markets the Hell House Outreach Kit for $299 (God Destiny 2006; Pam’s House Blend 2005).

In October 2006, the hell house phenomenon emerged in a surprisingly unconventional venue, serious theater. Produced in a Brooklyn theater “usually reserved for edgy bands and performance artists,” the script closely followed the walk-through tableaux format of regular amateur church productions, “presenting a grotesque and shocking imagining of contemporary secular culture.” Carefully avoiding spoof and parody, the actors’ performances were straightforward and serious. As a result, they successfully “gave viewers a peek, albeit extreme, inside an unfamiliar world.” The Brooklyn production played to full houses throughout its run and was reviewed by the mainline New York media (Philips and Miller 2006).

Conclusion

The interplay between oral tradition and popular culture invests the haunted house with the power of an almost universally recognized cultural icon. Since each new generation of American children is enculturated annually at Halloween with a whole panoply of supernatural information, including the appearance and significance of the haunted house, mass marketing responds with more and more books, movies, and artifacts each year. The cycle of knowledge is thus perpetuated and strengthened. Oral tradition, however, still clings to its ancient roots.

Although the glittering enchanted castle will always be the quintessential setting for the fairy tale or Märchen, the haunted house of the ghost story—with its shadowy darkness, skewed
perspectives, and evil countenance—is a negative mirror image that is brooding and introspective, inviting psychological involvement. The haunted house image—both inside and out—has remained consistent for at least the past two hundred years, the result of dynamic sharing and borrowing across genres and across media. The debate regarding the empirical reality of ghosts and the places they allegedly haunt exists on a conceptual plane quite separate from the shared cultural image, or mental template, of the haunted house. Regardless of whether one can point out an actual, literal haunted house on the landscape of one’s own neighborhood, the shared image of what such a haunted structure would look like and what could happen inside it is a reality. The stories we tell about haunted houses reinforce this reality. According to the distinguished cultural theorist Yi-Fu Tuan, discussing the medieval church at Glastonbury,

In those times, certain types of artifacts did appear to glow with numinous presence, but such attention as they attracted depended to a large degree on speech—on the circulation of vivid tales concerning a particular object or place. A sword lost its magic and a house ceased to be haunted if people no longer talked about them. Words are necessary to sustain the potency of a visual symbol. (1980, 467)

The marketing uses to which the haunted house is subjected in our postmodern world demonstrate that good sales don’t dilute the potency of a visual symbol but probably enhance it. In the final analysis, the haunted house can be conceptualized in folkloric terms as the ugly stepsister of the enchanted castle, just as the evil fairy who curses Sleeping Beauty is the negative counterpart of her sparkling sisters. Both the enchanted castle and the haunted house have the “rooms . . . sharp borders and horizontal and vertical interior lines” that Swiss folklorist Max Lüthi attributes to the fictional and fanciful folktale (1976). The lines and angles of the haunted house, however, are forever skewed and out of focus. The enchanted castle often floats above the terrestrial world on a cloud or is protected from contact with
the “real world” by other means. The basement or cellar of the haunted house, however, is dug into the primordial earth and is thus another manifestation of Lüthi’s shadowy and threatening legend cave (Lüthi 1976, 21). Metaphorically, the haunted house represents the point of contact, the transition, the threshold between the legend and the folktale, between reality and fiction. Reality exists *outside* of the haunted house. It is upon entering into the confines of the haunted house that the psychological landscape shifts and exposes us to the other-worldliness of the supernatural and the paranormal.